



Envoy Scholarship

Nistiman Erdedes participation at the Decolonial Summer School Middleburg/ Netherland 2016 on *Stolen Memories: Museums, Slavery and (De) Coloniality* was a success story for all sides. Thanks to privat sponsors Nistiman was able to join the course and to develop a distinguished topic to work on in the future. His text entitled *A Letter to a Friend/(De)Colonise the Table* reveals a personal recollection of individual experience, collective memories, historical facts, and explicit spaces inbetween. it is a promising starting point for further research and action. Since 2010 Nistiman is working individually and collaboratively on the topic of the replacement of this symbolic table.



(DE)COLONISE THE TABLE

Dear Friend,

Again we come together after a long time. We can never predict when and where we will meet. This time is special and it isn't easy for me to know where to start.

We are in Middelburg in a small town of Nederland. It is the "Decolonial Summer School that brings us here. There are two reasons that have made me fascinated by Decolonial Theories: firstly, I am a political refugee living in exile, and secondly, . as an activist, I participate in political art projects that aim to counter the stereotypes that surround immigrants. The Decolonial Summer School has helped me to analyse my personal experiences, to try to understand Decolonial theories and the background behind my exile.

Let me talk about the background of my exile, which is also related to this significant table that I will talk about later. Forgive me my friend because it is such a complicated issue. As a victim, it is difficult for me to write clearly about my experiences.

The Treaty of Lausanne is a peace treaty that was signed in Lausanne, Switzerland on 24 July 1923. It officially settled the conflict that had existed between the Ottoman Sultanate (Empire) and the Allied British Empire, French Republic, Kingdom of Italy, Empire of Japan, Kingdom of Greece, and the Kingdom of Romania since the onset of World War I.

This treaty was the start of the new Turkish Republic and, as a member of a minority group in Turkey, this is a key moment in our history.

With this letter, we shall analyze some of the Turkification policies which were implemented during the early years of the Republic and which became crystallized only in the formation of the Turkish nation state. In this context, by

“Turkification” policies I mean the way in which Turkish ethnic identity has been strictly imposed as a hegemonic identity in every sphere of social life ,from the language spoken in public to the teaching of history in public schools; from education to industry; from commercial practices to public employment policies; from the civil code to the re-settlement of certain citizens in particular areas. The preconditions of the implementation of Turkification policies can be summarized as follows: the emergence of Turkish nationalism as a well structured political ideology, the recognition of this ideology by the great majority of the political elite in power, and the existence of an international political conjuncture favourable to the implementation of these policies domestically¹.

Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the founder of the new Turkish Republic,

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, established a regime which was particularly concerned "Modern nation State". The new Turkish nationalist elite, the Kemalists (named after Atatürk), regarded the Ethno-religiously diverse society inherited from the Ottoman Empire as an obstacle to progress and based on notions of superiority of Western statehood. They deemed that only a homogenous and secular nation-state would be successful. This mindset was also underpinned by the trauma caused by the humiliating dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, as embodied in the 1920 Treaty of Sevres, which had resulted in large territorial losses. The Kemalist regime create social cohesion by imposing a secularised and westernised “national identity” based on Turkish language and culture. They launched an authoritarian homogenizing project with the aim of eliminating ethnic differences through ethnic domination and forced assimilation. Atatürk’s successor and Turkey’s second president, İsmet İnönü, described in

1 "Turkification" Policies in the Early Republic Era , Aktar Ayhan
https://www.academia.edu/884487/_Turkification_Policies_in_the_Early_Republican_Era

1925 the Turkish state's policy in the following words:

"We are frankly nationalists and nationalism is our only factor of cohesion. In the face of a Turkish majority, other elements have no kind of influence. Our duty is to Turkify non- Turks in the Turkish homeland no matter what happens. We will destroy those elements that oppose Turks or Turkism. What we are looking for in those who are to serve the country is, above all, that they are Turkish and Turk²."

It became part of official state discourse that Kurds were "Mountain Turks" who had forgotten their "Turkishness". Thus the aim to forcibly Turkify the Kurds and other ethnical and religious minorities was legitimised through this new "scientific" evidence. The regime sought to eradicate any mention of Kurdish identity, destroying historical artefacts and monuments that indicated a Kurdish presence and removing any references from maps and official documents to a territory called "Kurdistan", which had been widely acknowledged during the Ottoman era. As part of a spatial Turkification, names of Kurdish towns and villages were replaced with Turkish ones. Schools, official buildings and even mountains were inscribed with the crescent and star (symbols of the Turkish flag), as well as numerous chauvinist slogans such as "Happy is one who can call oneself a Turk" (Ne mutlu Türküm diyene). Ever since, the Kurdish provinces have been ruled "in a colonial way" where forced population resettlements, state-terror and ethnic persecution have become the everyday experience for the Kurds in Turkey.

Hopefully that brief historical introduction will make what and why I am writing to you much clearer. The need to "decolonise" a table is as a result of this history. The table pictured below is the table on which the Treaty of Lausanne was signed in 1923. During a visit to Turkey on 11 November 2008, the Swiss

2 12 Kurdish Human Rights Project, April 2003, *This is the Only Valley Where We Live: The Impact of The Munzur Dams*, The Corner House, London, pg. 6

President, Pascal Couchepin, gave it to his Turkish Colleague Abdullah Gül.

For me, and thousands of others, this table serves as a symbol of the beginning of Kurdistan's colonisation by Iraq, Syria and Turkey. On the map that was spread on this table, politicians divided Kurdistan between these countries with no consideration of the Kurdish people.

The gifting of this table happened at same time as I arrived in Switzerland as an asylum seeker.

I analysed my connection to the table with a political art group called the Immigrant Atelier Collective³. Its goal is to use political art to create a space to share the experiences of Asylum seekers with the public. At same time, the group fights against racism and discrimination. For example, for one project, we worked on the city map of Zürich using collage techniques. . The project it centred around the question: What are the connections between the cities we come from and where we live?

The “(De)colonialisation” of this table was my part in this collective work in 2010. This table is more than an object. It has much more meaning to me. On the other side, it has value as a present given to Turkey as a symbol of the friendship between Turkey and Switzerland, and as a promise of better economical relations between the two countries in the future.

The title of my work was A Present on Reminding Colonial Friendship. I placed the table on the city map where Landes Museum Zürich is located. If we want to find a place for this table, it should not be in Turkey as a symbol of pride. It should be in Switzerland, as a symbol of shame marking where Treaty of Lausanne was signed between countries without representation of any minorities from Turkey. It is the reason for so conflict and pain since 1923.

The table should be in Switzerland as a monumentself criticising

3 http://antikultiatelier.blogspot.ch/2012_07_01_archive.html

Switzerland's role in the colonial process. By making the table a symbol, you can then talk about how to (De)colonialise it . The collage served as the first step of this decolonising process. This will be a long and hard process.

As an immigrant, I have used art projects to help myself taking advantage of the expertise of academics and artists I have struggled with making myself the object of any installation or performance. However, I have realised that activism is a way of getting more experience and it is a way to change stereotypical images of the authentic (native) and the exotic (immigrants). Activism is, however, not enough. I want to access more get more theoretical resources and then use my thoughts, which are formed from my experiences as an “other” in this society to drive my actions.

Yours faithfully

Nistiman Erdede

Middleburg, July 2015